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URBAN ARCHITECTURE

Introduction

Urban Architecture

Architecture in Context
Brent C Brolin

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The Harlem River Houses
James Sanders and Roy Strickland

Savannah's City Plan as Resource
Stanford Anderson

Streetgrids and Urban Variety
Paul Groth

The Context of the Modern City
David Handlin

Lowell: From Building
to Architecture
Randolph Langenbach

Space, the American Mediator
Peter Smithson

The Asymmetrical Spine
William L Rawn, III

Symposium

"Urban Architecture: The Park
Square Sketch Problem"

Project Documentation
International House, Westlake
Projects, Notes on Buildings
and their Parts
Ronaldo Giurgola, Architect

The Athenicum, Manchester Civic
Center, Comments - Richard Meier

Book Review

Urban Space by Rob Krier

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Volume 2, Spring 1981

- 4 **Introduction**
Urban Architecture
- 10 Architecture in Context:
Fitting New Buildings With Old
Brent C Brolin
- 22 The Lessons of Rome
Jon Michael Schwarting
- 48 The Harlem River Houses
James Sanders and Roy Strickland
- 60 The Plan of Savannah and Changes of
Occupancy During Its Early Years:
City Plan as Resource
Stanford Anderson
- 68 Streetgrids as Frameworks for
Urban Variety
Paul Groth
- 76 The Context of the Modern City
David Handlin
- 90 From Building to Architecture:
The Emergence of Victorian Lowell
Randolph Langenbach
- 106 Space is the American Mediator, or
the Blocks of Ithaca: A Speculation
Peter Smithson
- 116 The Asymmetrical Spine:
A Generator for Design
William L Rawn, III
- 128 **Symposium**
"Urban Architecture: The Park
Square Sketch Problem," sponsored
by the *Review* November 1978
- Project Documentation**
- 162 International House, Philadelphia,
Pennsylvania; Westlake Projects,
Seattle, Washington; Notes on
Buildings and their Parts –
Romaldo Giurgola, Architect
- 176 The Atheneum, New Harmony,
Indiana; Manchester Civic Center,
Manchester, New Hampshire;
Comments – Richard Meier, Architect
- 188 **Book Review**
Urban Space (Stadtraum) by Rob Krier

The Plan of Savannah And Changes of Occupancy During Its Early Years: City Plan as Resource

Stanford Anderson

After a period in which the built environment was often viewed as inconsequential, or perhaps negative, for people and their activities, the recent enthusiasm for preservation and adaptive re-use of urban environments implies a markedly different, positive assessment. Yet we have little in the way of theory or historiography that will test or advance this enthusiasm.

Historical studies dominantly concern themselves with the origin of environments and consequently shed little light on what may be their continuing effects. Shifting historical inquiry to examine the patterns of tenacity and change in environment and its inhabiting forces would provide case studies of environment viewed not as a series of origins but as a constantly modified resource. Both the questions asked and the methods required for such studies should embody conjectures which might prove useful not only in preservation activities but also in decisions as to what kinds of new environments we should build.

Together with students at MIT, I am attempting this simultaneous advance on conjectures and information through the study of the engaging and instructive example of Savannah, Georgia.¹ However, before presenting an aspect of this study, I must set aside two counter-intuitive but nonetheless recurrent attitudes about the relation between social space and the physical city. I do not accept what is often referred to as "environmentalism" – that architecture or the physical city determines the use or interpretation of social space. We have seen so many examples of multiple uses or interpretations of the same physical environment, in simultaneous or successive instances, that the relationship cannot be deterministic. The complementary argument, that the physical environment is fully determined by the inhabiting forces, that the city is a kind of shell, that every society gets the environment it deserves, is more difficult to rebut. It collapses, however, on the same counter-examples of multiple uses or

¹ Shortened versions of these studies were presented at the 1979 annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians in Savannah. The work is still in preparation. The work has been partially supported by the Ernest Grunsfeld Memorial Fund of Chicago.

interpretations for the same physical place. If we assume, for the moment, that a society builds a certain environment in a fully deterministic manner, how do we account for another part of that society, or a succeeding society, using that same environment in a quite different way? Or how do we account for quite similar social needs inhabiting radically different forms? In both cases we must recognize a degree of environmental autonomy that defeats any claim for determinism.

These denials of environmentalism and social determinism do not, however, imply a total relativity; my asserted “degree of autonomy” should not be expanded and abused to the point where we treat the relation between social space and physical environment as a matter of indifference. What follows is one attempt to understand environment more fully while avoiding the seductive simplifications offered by the claims for determinism or autonomy.

Every physical form will support multiple uses or interpretations. Form has a certain degree of autonomy. Nonetheless, every form also sets limits, be they narrow or broad, to these multiple uses or interpretations. Furthermore, each form will sustain certain uses or interpretations more fully than it will others. In both these last respects, the environment is conditional; it imposes constraints and provides support. Its autonomy is delimited and also overlaid with a pattern of conditions. Much is possible within every environment – but not everything, and not everything that is permitted is equally possible or enhanced. An obvious corollary is that for any given purpose some environments will be more supportive than others in that they meet some set of conditions we wish to establish – providing, perhaps, a relative narrowing or focus of possible use or, alternatively, allowing a broad range of associated uses. The relation between social space and physical environment is, then, not determined but possibilist.

“Possibilism” has developed as a critique of environmentalism in both human geography and in ecology. I have been describing a special case of the same argument. I am advancing a possibilist urban ecology. By “urban ecology” I don’t mean to emphasize the relation of the entire city to its region or, quite generally, to nature, though this too is both present and important. Rather I would emphasize

the relation of individuals, groups, populations, and societies to their physical urban environment – the relation of social space to physical environment. Even in nature these relations of organism and environment are dynamic and reciprocal. It is not only the case that the environment is a quasi-autonomous, possibilist setting for the inhabiting organisms; the organisms also change the environment, sometimes markedly or even self-destructively. The reciprocity of people with their urban environment is at least as marked as that found in nature. In neither case does environment evolve; rather it undergoes a complex pattern of changes owing to the interplay of (autonomous and quasi-autonomous) environmental forces or conditions and the consequences of (both purposive and unintentional) actions. Human action within and upon the urban environment involves, quite obviously, rational and social behavior; nonetheless, the need to recognize environmental latitude and unintended results not only remains but is all the more challenging and interesting.

The factors just mentioned, the quasi-autonomous environmental conditions and the unintended results of human action, do not receive adequate treatment in accounts that emphasize the intentions of patrons, planners, or architects. Architectural and urban works are not fully accounted for in any analysis of origins or intentions; they must also be analyzed both in and for themselves and also in their continuing relationships with those who use and interpret them. This is particularly true for urban environments which often involve more complex sets of actors in their origins, affect more people, and often have especially tenacious conditions such as street networks.

A possibilist, ecological analysis of urban environment would then particularly require means of examining the quasi-autonomous structure of environment – the environmental conditions that both frame the possible and also pattern it through varying degrees of support and constraint. The following aspect of a larger study relates characteristics of the plan of Savannah to the changing patterns of inhabitation during the earliest years of Savannah.

Despite unusually extensive information about the foundation of the Georgia colony, we have almost no documents on the explicit intentions behind the

innovative, articulated grid of the town plan of Savannah. The plan must be studied from its present form and from contemporary and later documents that touch on its significance.² On the other hand, we are fortunate to have surprisingly detailed demographic information for the first decade of the settlement of Georgia. The principal document is a manuscript at the University of Georgia, "A List of Persons Who Went from Europe to Georgia on Their Own Account, or at the Trustees' Charge, or who Joyned the Colony or were Born in It, Distinguishing Such as Had Grants there or were only Inmates."³ Included in this data is relatively complete information on the precise lots to which people were assigned, or which they came to use, in Savannah. It is this locational information which permits one to explore whether, even in the first years of Savannah, locational decisions were of significance and whether alternative readings of the distinctive plan of Savannah influenced the decisions.

Georgia was the result of a proposal for a "charitable colony." In 1730, a group of members of the English Parliament, led by James Oglethorpe, having examined and notably alleviated the problems of debtors' prisons, turned their attention to an underlying problem: the lack of opportunity for the urban poor. Oglethorpe conceived that a new colony on the American continent might be organized and populated in such a way that these urban poor as well as continental refugees of religious persecution would have the opportunity to build productive lives. Colonists would be persuaded to go to this new land by the future promise of the colony and by

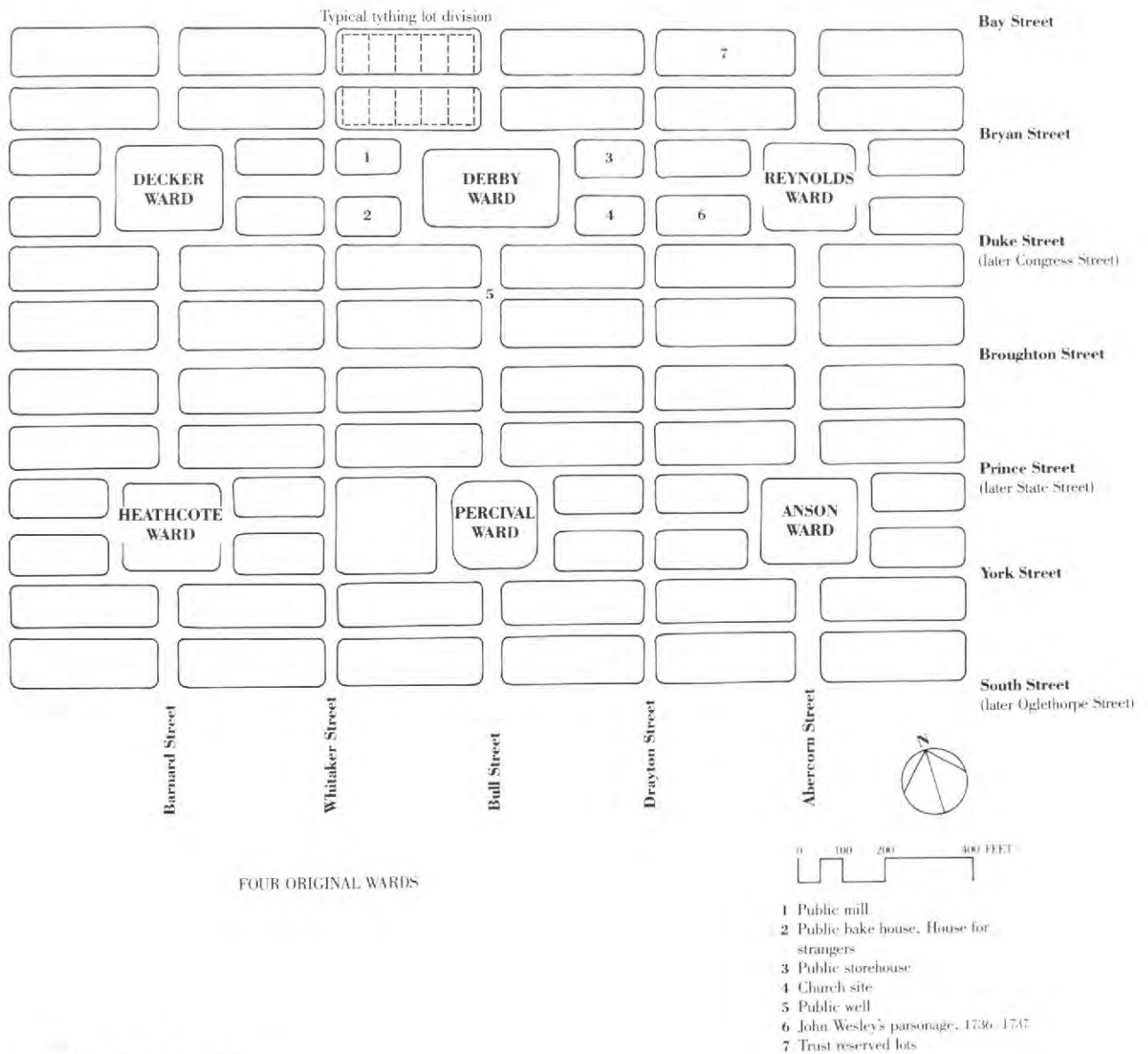
various forms of immediate support: free passage for entire families, the assignment of fifty acres of land and of basic tools, and the guarantee of provisions for a period until the colonists could reap the fruits of their own farming. However, initial philanthropic enthusiasm soon waned. Oglethorpe and his colleagues – the most constant of whom soon proved to be John Percival, later Lord Egmont, who was also the compiler of the *List* on which this essay relies – had already used their positions and diligent application to persuade the Crown, the Government and Parliament to provide the lands of what came to be Georgia. Soon parliamentary appropriations were also the basic financial support of the Trustees. Government favor was premised more on the potential benefits of the Colony than on the succor of the disadvantaged; the extension and buffering of the English lands on the Spanish frontier, and the promise of economic gain in the receipt of raw materials from what would simultaneously be a new market. The Trustees solicited and won colonists whom they could send at the charge of the Trustees. But already with the first boatload, sent to found the settlement which came to be Savannah, the Trustees found it necessary to increase the size and strength of their colonization effort by assigning larger land claims to colonists who would pay their own way. Up to a maximum of 500 acres, land was assigned according to the number of indentured servants brought by these entrepreneurial colonists. Thus even the first boatload of Georgia colonists was marked by a class division. While the Trustees sought to impose the same basic rules against slavery, drink, and alienation of land on all the colonists, this evenhandedness only hastened the

² The precedent and origins of the Savannah plan have been studied by me for the above collective work. Such studies are not critical to the present argument and therefore are not reviewed here.

³ In simplified format, the manuscript was edited and published by E Merton Coulter and Albert B Saye as *A List of the Early Settlers of Georgia* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1949; second printing, 1967); the serial number of the MS is 14220. I fully agree with the editors in identifying the compiler of the *List* as John Percival, first Earl of Egmont and the first, extremely devoted, President of the Trustees for Establishing the Colony of Georgia in America. Coulter and Saye, while recognizing the importance of the document, cast some doubt on the accuracy of its numbers. After extensive analysis and comparison with independent demographic information, I am satisfied that the document is highly reliable through the 1730s, ceases to record information fully about the middle to latter part of 1741, and then decays with a few sporadic references.

For the purposes of the present study, it was necessary to recompile the list from its alphabetic form into one according to the lots assigned or taken up by the colonists. It was also necessary to choose temporal breakpoints where one could detail both the demographic and locational information. For this purpose, I chose the end of the first year of settlement, the date of the first official designation of lots, December, 1733; the approximate time of Savannah's greatest population in this early period and a time for which we have the best independent demographic data, December, 1736; and the last data in the manuscript. Two further intermediate break points are June, 1735, and June, 1738, coinciding with the Trustees' fiscal year (and thus some demographic data) and yielding equal intervals of one and one-half years for all but the final, more uncertain date and data.

All of the work mentioned here is voluminous and often tedious. In this article, I draw freely from that information but cannot detail it within the space available.



1 Savannah in the 1730s

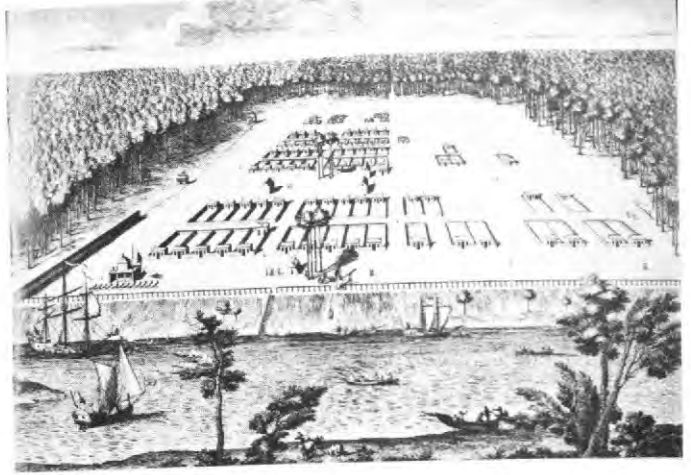
rebellious activities of those who had paid their own way.

Figure 1 shows the first four wards of Savannah as they were set out in 1733 and the two easterly wards added in 1734. "Ward" is, of course, a political term. The initial scheme for Savannah, as conceived in London, called for a colony of equals each of whom worked a small piece of land but also played a role in a collaborative urban community. Equality and community were to be assured by the rules that prohibited both slavery and alienation or accumulation of land. The absence of slavery ruled out one obvious social distinction, but the two rules existed primarily to avoid the development of a situation such as that which already pertained in Carolina – the existence of great slave-owning landholders who weakened the colonial community both by the social disparity internal to the settlers and by their spatial dispersal. The willingness to accept a perpetual near-subsistence community was presumed to follow from the relative improvement this represented for those dispossessed persons sent from Europe by the Georgia Trustees.

The Trustees held for themselves most of the political control of the colony, but they did organize the first colonists for local governance. Ten freeholders (the freeholder was an adult male and was usually also the head of a family) formed a tything and had among them a tything man. Four such tythings made up a ward whose principal officer was a constable.

Purely formally, the Savannah plan can be read as a physical layout congruent with this political organization. Each replicated unit of the plan, specifically called a ward, is comprised of an open center and four quarters composed of ten parcels (called tythings) laid out in groups of five, back-to-back, sharing a lane or alley.

This isomorphism of political and topographical tythings and wards was surely intentional, played its initial role of closely fitted form and function, and has its reverberations down to the present day. However, what I wish briefly to demonstrate are alternative formal and functional readings of the plan – even within its first years.



The first colonists who left London for Savannah included not only the people with their tything and ward officers, but also their peers charged with responsibilities relative to the entire community: political officers such as the bailiffs, the register, the calender; persons with official functions such as the keeper of the Trust's stores, the Public Gardener, and the surveyor; and persons of esteemed or special communal value such as the doctor, apothecary and public midwife.

While even the first boatload of colonists were slightly too numerous for one ward, it is not surprising that they first filled one physical ward, Derby Ward, locating the overflow largely in the most proximate lots of the contiguous wards. It may also seem rather obvious and yet again an isomorphism of form and function that a very high proportion of the communal leaders mentioned in the preceding paragraph were assigned lots near the center of Derby Ward.⁴ Here, too, on the specially reserved parcels/blocks east and west of the central open space were located the Trust's storehouse, the "house for strangers," the public bake house, the public mill, and the site reserved for the church.

There can be little question, then, but that the originators of Savannah and its first settlers saw the plan as a collection of wards. However, this assumption immediately led to certain ambiguities of physical form and function.

Derby Ward, as the first ward fully settled and with its collection of people and buildings of communal importance, had an obvious dominance over the early town. Its central space, Johnson Square, remains to this day the constantly reinforced principal square of the city. Yet for several reasons, Johnson Square could never assume the dominant central role of the main squares of colonial cities such as New Orleans or those of the Spanish New World. Johnson Square was neither unique nor central, even in the first years of Savannah. Each ward replicated not only the central space but also the full complement of Trustee lots reserved for eventual communal purposes. Each ward was too

small to be a parish or a distinctive political entity in itself; the interrelation of ward to ward and the sharing of communal facilities located in one or another was implicit from the beginning and soon realized in Savannah.

In addition to these aspects of inter-ward organization and scale, there are physical aspects internal to the ward which inhibit the sole reading of the city as a collection of centralized wards.

Each ward has as many parcels on peripheral streets as on its internal streets. This numerical inhibition of the dominance of center over periphery is strengthened by the topological organization of the internal freeholders' parcels. These parcels do not ring the central square, creating a closed central group, but rather align on east-west streets which run continuously, and shortly, into adjoining wards. The original dominant assignment of people of communal importance to the internal parcels of Derby Ward, examined in plan or in lived experience, is more emphatically an emphasis on selected streets than on the center per se. This fact could be exaggerated by later incidents of use or occupation, as actually happened in the first year of Savannah. In that first year the colonists suffered a very heavy death toll. While the community leaders were disproportionately low in such loss, death did claim three men – the second Bailif, the Store Keeper and the doctor – whose Bryan Street lots faced Johnson Square on either side of Bull Street, the lots that might be considered the focus of the initial centralized occupation of Derby Ward. Thomas Causton, who lived further west on Duke Street, replaced Richard Hodges as second Bailif and Joseph Hughes as Store Keeper; by such incidents the alternative linear, street-oriented reading of the plan was emphasized.

As more settlers arrived the first four wards were virtually filled; the first of several extensions of Savannah took place with the addition of Reynolds and Anson wards to the east. While no ward evidences such a concerted policy of lot assignment as did the original Derby Ward, one can recognize

⁴ Oglethorpe, a Trustee and the chief originator of the scheme for a charitable colony, accompanied the first boatload of colonists and was principally resident in Georgia for many years. Although the Trustees were highly paternalistic, as in their hold on general political control and relations with the English

crown and government, they were absolutely not exploitative. No Trustee could receive any land or have any other economic gain from the Georgia colony. In keeping with this disinterestedness, Oglethorpe did not take a lot in Savannah but rather lived in a tent near the river's edge.

certain patterns. Additional colonists from the original boat and other early settlers who had “come on their own” dominated Decker Ward, and here Bay Street, the riverfront street, assumed dominance from the outset. Percival Ward, contiguous to Derby Ward on the south, was given over largely to the continuing influx of those sent by the Trustees. Thus Bull Street became the main axis from port to community center and through the living quarters of the Trust’s own settlers. Until 1738, Heathcote Ward was also dominated by Trust-sent persons, and shows an unusually high proportion of people in crafts and skilled labor. Both these southerly wards were almost wholly lacking in people charged with general community responsibilities. The paucity of such persons on the southern periphery of even Derby and Decker wards resulted in little disparity between the occupants of either side of Broughton Street. This east-west street on the boundary between wards contained one-fourth of all lots in the city, was central to the city, and was the only double-sided street. While, as noted, Broughton Street was not assigned the people of note or of general responsibility, it did continually show a strong family structure and its residents were disproportionately high among those people characterized as “good planters.” Percival used this term in recognizing those few people who had shown diligence and some success in seeking to make Georgia that which it was envisioned to be – a community of equal, self-respecting, self-sustaining farmer-citizens.

With the opening of Reynolds and Anson wards, a distinctive shift in lot assignment policies can be recognized. More people, both Trust- and self-sent, were assigned more quickly to the landward Anson Ward than to Reynolds. These were people of no distinctive claim or responsibility. By contrast the riverfront Reynolds Ward was now assigned an obvious importance and internally structured. At least the five westerly freeholder lots on the riverfront – on Bay Street – in Reynolds Ward were set aside as “Trust reserved”; not in the sense of the inner “Trust lots” reserved for communal purposes, but rather reserved for selective private assignment. In 1736, one of these lots was granted to the infant son of Thomas Causton, then and until 1739 both first Bailif and Publick Store Keeper. A second lot was granted in early 1738 to Will Kelway, who was valued as a trader and Spanish interpreter.

Across Abercorn Street, the other five riverfront lots were also granted with privilege and a sense of the increasing importance and distinctive use of the riverfront street. The first two of these lots were granted together with licenses for public houses. The two easternmost lots were assigned to former servants of Oglethorpe, one of whom, John Brownfeild, was both an officer of the community and involved in local and English trade. In the original assignment of Derby Ward, the riverfront lots received no special distinction and were, as noted, certainly secondary to the lots internal to the ward. The riverfront had already received de facto emphasis in the assignment and use of these lots in Decker Ward. Early reports of illicit sale of drink and of bawdy houses concentrated on riverfront lots. With the opening of Reynolds Ward, the potential of the riverfront for commercial use – trade as well as licensed public houses – became explicit policy. The original ideal of equal, family-based citizen-farmers was being displaced by a differentiated, mercantilist community. As might be expected, throughout the period considered here Bay Street was disproportionately low in families and children.

By the end of 1736 the early artisanal, and possibly commercial, strength of Heathcote Ward had fallen to an average position. Percival and Decker wards also weakened slightly. Nonetheless, Decker Ward maintained an average commercial strength relative to the entire community and, together with the old strength of Derby Ward and the new intensity of Reynolds Ward, the new pattern of dominance was across the waterfront wards. Within these wards, it was the streets closest to the river that dominated. Bay and Bryan streets, with only 24% of lots likely occupied at that time, had 46% of likely commercial activity and 48% of commercial and communal services combined. If one adds Duke Street (and still not counting the specifically communal buildings on the adjoining trust lots) the figures are 38%, 63%, and 64% respectively. The city had become river-oriented; Bay Street was active throughout its length; Bryan Street was still strongest in Derby Ward. During this period of growth of the entire town, Broughton, Prince, York, and South streets all showed significantly diminished strength – a downward course that was to intensify. Location decisions already revealed patterns in concert with neither original assignments nor overall communal change.

Near the end of 1736, Savannah reached its population peak for the early years of settlement. Disappointment in the agrarian development, discontent with Trustee rules, the Spanish threat, and erratic parliamentary support resulted in lower immigration and an increasing emigration to other colonies or back to England.

This period of decline is interesting for us in that changes of occupation become increasingly independent of the original rules of lot assignment. In the early stages of the decline, the population of Decker Ward declined proportionally; that of Derby Ward was steady while Reynolds Ward grew rapidly. Derby and Decker wards maintained their earlier commercial strength while Reynolds Ward actually increased its commercial and communal service. Heathcote Ward suffered major erosion in all these respects and Anson Ward proves never to have gotten off the ground. Actual gains near the waterfront provide even greater relative dominance for these wards and streets. In these landward wards, only Broughton Street as much as held with the average rate of decline. In the late, worst stages of decline, Broughton Street showed relative gains in population and commercial activity. These last two observations are documented in the table below.

At the end of the record here under discussion, Savannah had suffered a decline to a population smaller than it was in the first year of the settlement. Every ward and every street shared in this decline although Bryan Street retained its earlier amount of most certainly identifiable

commercial activity. Relative strength continued to accumulate in Derby and Reynolds wards and particularly on Bay and Bryan streets in those wards. At the end of our record, Broughton Street ran counter to the general decline: with 25% of available lots it had 30% of the population, 34% of the wives, and 50% of the "good planters."

Savannah had retrenched as a stratified river town with its potential as a larger, more articulated fabric hanging in the balance. The late showing of relative strength on Broughton Street may have presaged a next stage in which Bay Street represented the external and mercantile potential of Savannah, and Broughton Street the internal, familial and agrarian potential.

Here I shall only mention that, with the revival of Savannah in the later eighteenth century, this pattern did emerge, complemented by the concerted use of the center of Decker Ward as the market square. In the nineteenth century, the city rapidly added new wards to the south. The availability of new residential areas there and the growth of local commercial activities made the only double-sided street near the existing commercial zone, Broughton Street, the latent resource for a new commercial pattern – Broughton Street as Main Street.

While this account of urban occupancy of early Savannah has been severely condensed from a more detailed study, the point of its telling must be reinforced. On the one hand, we may note various kinds of human actions, ranging from preconceived conventions of political organization worked out in

	June, 1738				
	% of available lots	% of all lots likely occupied	% of population	% of all commercial	% of all commercial and communal
Derby and Reynolds wards	34	36	43	64	67
Three riverfront wards	50	56	63	82	84
Bay and Bryan streets	25	29	30	64	57
Bay, Bryan and Duke streets	38	43	49	78	74
Broughton Street	25	23	22	19	10
	End of report				
Derby and Reynolds wards	34	36	33	69	72
Three riverfront wards	50	59	63	84	89
Bay and Bryan streets	25	28	27	61	61
Bay, Bryan and Duke streets	38	40	41	77	78
Broughton Street	25	28	30	24	11

London, through changing policies of land assignment by the local officers in Savannah, to considered location decisions by Savannah residents, and even to mere accidents of life in Savannah. On the other hand, we note several characteristics of an urban environment. The town plan of Savannah was also a convention – a newly innovated convention – worked out in London. Within its own formalisms there are ambiguities that lead to alternative readings – additive wards vs. a network of streets, multiple centers vs. peripheries that join in a systematic web, an east-west layering established by the parcelling and related subsidiary streets, to mention only three. There are effects of scale – the ward that is too small to become an enclave, and balances between center and periphery because it turns as many lots outward as inward. There are effects of the addition of ward units; for example, Broughton Street lengthens and continues to have 25% of all the lots of the town as new wards are added to east or west. That is, Broughton Street becomes a greater land resource than any ward and possesses additional powerful characteristics such as centrality, linearity, and symmetry. Finally there are the interactions of the real topography of Savannah with its plan conventions. The river not only delimits growth to the north, but gives specific potential to the northerly streets and wards. Small streams, change of level, and low-lying ground inhibited the growth of Savannah to east and west after the ward unit had been repeated six times along the river. The location of the garden and farm lots of Savannah well to the south reinforced north-south movement channels versus the articulated location of freeholder lots and activities along east-west channels. The common land between the town and the gardens was a convention that secured a large tract of land into which the city could expand for more than one century.

Both these human actions and the plan characteristics have unintended as well as intended results; instances of each have varying degrees of longevity. We may observe, then, two relatively autonomous but conjoined systems: the changing physical city (in this example analyzed as a system of plan conventions) and a historical course of urban activities.

Neither system determines the other; there is not only much slippage between the two, but this slippage is necessary if change in one (which may

have ramifications throughout its own system) is not always to require concomitant (and possibly extensive) change in the other system. This much speaks to the autonomy of the two systems, but, if left at this, would return us to the irrelevance of enquiring into the relation of the two systems.

I have spoken, however, of the “relative autonomy,” or the “quasi-autonomy,” of the two systems. Savannah – or, in this analysis, the plan of Savannah – is selected and commended on the basis that *this* plan convention, with its unusual combination of intricate articulation and replication, has been able to lend environmental support to a series of quite different patterns of habitation. It has supported synchronic patterns of use, sometimes resisting and testing, channeling but not inhibiting diachronic patterns of changing use. And for this very reason – that is, its openness to reinterpretation and positive support of different uses – wholesale change of the physical fabric has not been necessary. Indeed, for an American city, Savannah has shown a remarkable durability with concomitant benefits both in the efficient use of resources and in the cumulative reinforcement of certain increasingly valued environmental qualities.

There are several conclusions I wish to draw from this exposition:

- 1 the hypothesis that all urban environments operate similarly to this analysis of two systems – social space and environmental resource – in reciprocal, possibilist relations defined by limits, thresholds, and reinforcements rather than by determined causation;
- 2 that, while all urban environments work in this way, some physical organizations, such as the plan of Savannah (and this could be extended to the three-dimensional fabric as well), are advantageous in that their diversity and potential multiple interpretations better sustain synchronic complexity and temporal change;
- 3 that interventions in the social or physical fabric of cities which are based on another understanding – for example, determinism or total autonomy – are then misconceived and more apt to have undesirable, unintended consequences;
- 4 that the relations hypothesized here require theoretical, methodological, and historiographic development.